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SUBJECT: MOROCCO PROPOSES NEW LAW TO RESCUE LITTLE MAIDS

REFS: 05 Casablanca 00686

¶1. (U) This message is sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

¶2. (U) Summary: On May 9, 2006, Secretary of State in Charge of Families, Children, and the Handicapped, Yasmina Baddou, announced the GOM's plan of action to end the practice of employing child maids in Morocco. The problem of hiring underage domestics was recently highlighted in Human Rights Watch's report denouncing the issue. The ambitious new proposal, spearheaded by Baddou's office, will require the active participation of four Ministries and two secretariats as well as non-governmental organizations and

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civil society as a whole, in order to succeed.

¶3. (U) The multi-layered project will prohibit the employment of children under 15 as domestic servants, designate tougher punishment for those who employ the girls, and prosecute those who act as intermediaries between families of the girls and potential employers. The plan of action also details the need for improving the quality of education, raising the level of awareness of the dangers of the practice, and developing a system of monitoring all domestic employment. A pilot project, funded by the King's National Initiative for Human Development (INDH), will kick off the plan in five cities nationwide, beginning with Casablanca. End Summary.

An Integrated Approach

¶4. (U) Tuesday, May 9, 2006, in a conference attended by government officials, prominent leaders of domestic and international NGOs, and the press, Secretary of State in Charge of Families, Children and the Handicapped, Yasmina Baddou, presented the GOM's new plan of action to end the practice of hiring girls, as young as 5 years old, to work as household domestics. The new national program called "Inqad" (rescue in Arabic) is a long-term plan of action to be undertaken over the next 10 years. The end goal of the plan is to eliminate the practice of hiring little girls as maids, withdraw the girls already in domestic service, and

re-integrate them into society.

¶5. (U) In order to create, as Baddou put it, "a Morocco worthy of its children" the plan of action will require broad participation. Delegates from the Ministries of Justice, Interior, Employment, National Education, and the Secretariat of State in Charge of Literacy and Non-Formal

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Education took part in the conference and voiced wholehearted support for the project. Also in attendance was a representative of the Bureau of National Security who spoke at length on his office's desire to be involved in the effort. He expressed the need for all Moroccan citizens to come together and speak out against the practice.

¶6. (U) In addition to government entities, Baddou recognized the need for participation of NGOs in the endeavor. The GOM is working closely with United Nations' Children's Fund (UNICEF), International Program on the Elimination of Child Labor (IPEC), and ADROS (a United States Department of Labor funded child rescue project), all of which are playing a vital role in the plan by offering technical assistance or expertise.

Rescue Me

¶7. (U) The diverse strategies of the plan of action aim to do more than just prohibit the employment of child maids in Morocco. The seven-pronged program will include:
--new legislation already in the works to regulate all domestic help
--an awareness campaign to enlighten Moroccans about the dangers of placing their daughters in domestic servitude
--development of a specialized program to reintegrate the young girls into the national school system and improvement

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of the system of education overall
--development of a method to monitor domestic labor
--establishment of partnerships with organizations already withdrawing girls from domestic work
--lending financial assistance to families of potential child maids in economic distress by making available micro-credit loans
--creation of a unit for the "Protection of Children" pilot program through the INDH in Casablanca followed by units in Tangier, Fez, Marrakech, and Laayoune (Western Sahara) to remove girls from the labor market and monitor their situation after the removal.

International Criticism

¶8. (U) In its December 2005 report, Human Rights Watch (HRW) strongly criticized Morocco's child labor practices claiming that "Morocco has one of the highest child labor rates in the Middle East and Africa." The report documented cases of girls, as young as five, working 100 or more hours a week for less than a dollar a day. The GOM itself admits that there is a problem and in 2005 released a report saying that over 600,000 children under 15 are employed illegally in Morocco, more than 66,000 of them as child domestics. Secretary Baddou, while acknowledging the problem, took

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issue with the report saying that "HRW's figures and comparisons are exaggerated and lack credibility" and that they sought no input on the subject from the GOM before publishing their report.

Comment

¶9. (SBU) Morocco's new plan of action is an ambitious attempt to force Moroccan society to examine the all too common practice of considering poverty-stricken children as part of the workforce and not the educational system. The practice of sending young girls to work as maids is as much a cultural issue as an economic one. Baddou's plan addresses these problems and more, and by bringing in numerous branches of the government and social sector, she may be assuring wider involvement. Some NGO and civic leaders are skeptical that the plan will make a difference and cite the fact that minimum age of employment in Morocco is already set at 15 and what Morocco needs to do is merely enforce its current laws.

¶10. (SBU) Since coming into office in 2004 Baddou has been an outspoken and well respected advocate of children's rights. She was one of the forces behind last summer's media campaign to bring the issue into public consciousness, joining NGO leaders' efforts to return abused maids to their families after withdrawing them from their abusive employers homes and marching in rallies to show support of the issue. While there is a healthy bit of skepticism, in the greater community and even among mission officers, there is also a feeling that if Baddou can insure collaboration on the project it may stand a good chance given other reforms recently seen in Morocco.

Greene